

THE USE OF FACEBOOK IN CONGREGATIONAL EVANGELISM: A PRACTICAL
PLAN

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Abstract

Facebook is used every single day by hundreds of millions worldwide. As soon as they logon, people are viewing dozens of photos, videos, and status updates that their friends are passing around. Imagine if congregation members were to pass along content from their church's Facebook Page to their unchurched friends.

Despite Facebook's popularity and ubiquity, only half of all WELS churches utilize this social medium. Many that are using it are satisfied simply with keeping in touch with members and making bulletin announcements. Facebook holds much more potential than that, especially in terms of Great Commission evangelism. Members of the local congregation have dozens, if not hundreds of Facebook friends in desperate need of hearing the gospel. This project focuses on treating those friends as outreach prospects.

Rooted in scriptural principles and with a view toward trends in congregational and commercial marketing strategies, this project proposes a practical plan for a church to use a Facebook Page to reach out to the unchurched members of its community. This is a five-step plan that consists of 1) getting the members involved, 2) looking presentable, 3) generating content, 4) using *Insights*, and 5) contacting prospects.

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Introduction

Amy logged onto Facebook just as she had a hundred times before. She saw in her news feed on Facebook's home screen advertisements from certain brands, photos from her cousin's wedding, and witty comments from her friends. As she scrolled through these stories, she noticed a post from a local church that her friend had shared. The title of the article popped off the screen and grabbed her attention: "God is Pro-You." Amy clicked the link. She read a story written by a man whose mother was diagnosed with stage four Hodgkin's Lymphoma while she was pregnant with him. Her doctors told her that if she did not immediately abort the pregnancy and seek treatment, she was going to die. Against the doctor's strong recommendation to abort, she gave birth to a son. Now, many years later, both the mother and her son are alive and well.

This article brought back all the suppressed guilt more than ever before. It had been many years since Amy herself had aborted a pregnancy. Now the grave questions overwhelmed her heart again. What if my child were alive today? Where is my child now? How could I do such a thing?

A week later Amy saw another Facebook post from the same church. This time it was a woman from that congregation writing about her own profoundly sad decision to have an abortion. She too was guilt-stricken and ashamed at what she had done, but she knew where to find comfort. The article closed with these words: "If you are a woman who has had an abortion like me and you are suffering in silence, then take it to Jesus. He loves you. He loves your child. You are forgiven."¹

The next Sunday Amy showed up at that church for worship. She met with the pastor to tell him about how moved she was by those Facebook posts, and how she finally found peace in Jesus. A few months later, Amy's guilt was washed away by the water and the Word in Holy Baptism. Her pastor told me, "We're so thankful to share God's grace with this woman who has felt so guilty for so long."²

When Jesus issued the Great Commission, he sent out his apostles to people like Amy—searching for hope, desperate for good news. He gave them this command: "Go

¹ With respect for anonymity, the URL is withheld from this paper.

² Response to an email survey, November 2013.

into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). The whole world was in helpless need of a Savior and Jesus appointed these men to go and tell them the good news that they do have a Savior. The method by which they were to do this was not assigned, but the tool was—namely, the gospel. Certainly the methods of going out into the world and preaching to all creation have changed since the time of the apostles, yet the good news of Jesus Christ has not. The gospel continues to be the instrument God gives his Church to reach out to unbelievers.

In many ways, gospel ministry is communication. Through the gospel in spoken and written form, the Holy Spirit communicates to the hearts of unbelievers and guides them to learn, know, and grasp the saving truth of grace in Christ crucified. Martin Luther explains this in the *Large Catechism*, “In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed.”³

Advances in communication technology throughout history have made both publishing and proclaiming the Word faster and more efficient. When Luther uncovered the truth of the gospel in the early 16th Century, Gutenberg’s movable type printing press allowed his message to spread more rapidly than any previous means of publication could have. Then as time progressed, radio and television again made communication more efficient and many churches worldwide have made good use of them to proclaim the gospel. Then came the personal computer and the dawn of the internet, which made the sharing of information instantaneous through websites and email. At this point in history, smartphones and tablets are the latest breakthrough in communication technology—allowing the exchange of information through devices people carry in their pockets.

How can a church publish and proclaim the gospel across these laptops, smartphones, and tablets to reach out to the unchurched? The easiest and most efficient way is to engage in the social media that people are already using on each of these devices. Internet how-to author Nils Smith says, “We are called to share the love of

³ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 436.

Christ with all the world. Throughout history, I don't know if there has ever been a greater tool to do this than the internet and, specifically, social media.”⁴

What is Social Media?

Social media is⁵ the most popular activity on the web. Over one billion people in the world use Facebook, most of whom check it daily.⁶ Twitter has roughly 500 million users. Instagram and Pinterest are growing at rapid paces. The sheer numbers alone should make a pastor and his congregation at least a little interested in using these in some way.

There are many ways of defining this 21st Century phenomenon called social media. Meredith Gould, an authority in the communications field, offers a concise definition: “Social media are web-based tools for interaction that, in addition to conversation, allow users to share content such as photos, videos, and links to resources.”⁷ Jason Caston, an internet church expert, places the definition in ministry context: “There are numerous statistics, facts and definitions that people quote when talking about social media but when it comes to social media and ministry, the consensus is simple, interactive communication reaching the masses. Another part of the Great Commission.”⁸

It is true that Great Commission evangelism may not be the primary reason a church gets involved in social media. The goal may be more about inreach than about outreach. There are many ways and many areas in which pastors and congregations could

⁴ Nils Smith, *Social Media Guide for Ministry: What it is and How to Use it* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2013), 38.

⁵ There is some debate on whether the plural noun “social media” should be treated as singular or plural in sentence construction. I have chosen to treat it in the singular, but some of the quoted authors treat it in the plural.

⁶ Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith, “Frequency of Social Media Use,” *Pew Research Center*, December 30, 2013, <http://pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/frequency-of-social-media-use/> (accessed February 10, 2014). 63% of Facebook users logon at least once per day.

⁷ Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 6.

⁸ Jason Caston, *The iChurch Method: How to Advance your Ministry Online* (Frisco, TX: Caston Digital Publishing, 2013), 122.

use social networking sites: bulletin announcements, sermon postings, youth group planning, small and large group Bible studies, and even some degree of counseling. David Hansen, a church media blogger, boils these down effectively: "Social media is both a stethoscope, magnifying your ability to listen to your congregation and community, and a megaphone, magnifying your ability to proclaim God's word to your community."⁹ In a similar vein, Richard Vosko writes, "The primary purpose of using social media is to establish and maintain relationships, to connect with and stay connected with members of the congregation. The added feature is the possibility of attracting someone who is searching for new spiritual affiliation."¹⁰ The purpose of this paper is to explore how a church can use social media, specifically Facebook, as a megaphone—that added feature—in the context of the Great Commission.

Is this Wise?

Some pastors wish to stay away from social media altogether for a number of reasons. If he decides steering clear is the best thing for his ministry, God will bless that decision. However, the reasons for doing so should really be evaluated before a pastor makes up his mind one way or the other. Some reasons he finds legitimate might not be. Is it because he sees no value in it? Maybe he doesn't, but many of the people he serves are obsessed with it. Is it because he's unfamiliar with it and is concerned about the considerable time it would take to learn how to use it? Taking the time would go a long way to show to his members and his community that he wishes to connect with them from a point of genuine relatability rather than of distant authority. Plus, there is probably someone on staff or in the congregation's leadership that would be fully capable of handling the church's social media responsibilities. Is it because the pastor sees Facebook as a passing trend? Maybe it is. Maybe it will die the painful death of AOL Instant Messenger or MySpace, but if its popularity is any indication, its passing will not come any time soon.

One of the most widespread reasons for ignoring Facebook is the notion that it is just for young people, and that using it could be perceived as a feigned attempt at

⁹ David Hanson, quoted in Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, Foreword, x.

¹⁰ Richard Vosko, "Liturgical Technology, Social Media, and the Green Church," *Liturgical Ministry* (Spring 2011), 91.

attracting a younger crowd. However, since the end of 2011, the most rapidly growing segment of Facebook users has been comprised of people (mostly women) in their 50's and older.¹¹ Social media is no longer a high school and college trend; it is a part of everyday life.

On the other hand, there are some perfectly legitimate reasons a pastor may decide social media is not right for his ministry. He may have real concerns about the spiritual dangers involved in the obsessive nature of social media and he needs to take a stand against it on scriptural grounds. The narcissism and self-promotion that social media revolves around is a genuine danger to the cross-bearing life of his flock. He might be grieved to discover embarrassing or sinful actions his members have publicly posted in words and in pictures, and then he's faced with the question of whether that should be handled publicly or privately. Although this paper focuses on the congregation's Facebook page, there is also the question of the pastor's personal profile and the discernment in what he posts publicly about himself—where to draw the line between personal, professional, and pastoral relationships.

At the center of pastor's resistance to social media is a pastoral heart that yearns to offer the means of grace to people in the flesh. He is not as interested in the carefully crafted façade his member displays on Facebook as he is in the sinner/saint who needs to be refreshed, restored, and forgiven by the proclamation of the gospel in Word and sacrament. He wishes to create relationships in person and cultivate Christian fellowship within his congregation in a way that is real, not virtual. M. Craig Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, laments:

My soul is already weary of virtual relationships and constructed identities. All that social media can give me is “up-to-the-second information” about people. This is helpful. But what I really want is to know them and be known. From the day the word became flesh and dwelled among us it has been clear to Christians that this requires physical presence.¹²

Yet this study is not about whether or not digital relationships are authentic, nor is it about the gap between virtual and actual personas, it is rather a study about meeting people where they are. Social media in the context of evangelism is a steppingstone to

¹¹ Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 65.

¹² M. Craig Barnes, “Facebook Tsunami,” *Christian Century* (March 2013): 35.

face-to-face contact. For better or worse, social media is where the people are, and wherever the people are, Christians called to proclaim the gospel also should be. In a short ebook entitled *Facebook for Churches*, Jerod Clark writes,

While there are still plenty of churches debating whether or not they should use Facebook, 800 million people are already there—including people from your church. You don't opt-in to using it anymore. You only opt-out. And if you decide to ignore Facebook, you're missing out on a ministry opportunity. Facebook takes time and it may not be your favorite thing in the world, but it's a valuable tool for communicating with your members and reaching out to their friends."¹³

Clark may be stating his case more strongly than I would, but his thoughts are noteworthy. If there are this many people on Facebook, a pastor should have a clear and examined reason to keep his church's ministry from getting involved in it.

He should also have a clear and examined reason to pursue social media. Congregational leadership must develop a strong understanding of whom they want to reach, what they want to say, and how a Facebook page will help them accomplish their goals. Without this level of focus, the megaphone will be muffled; the prospects will not hear the projected message.

Why Choose Facebook?

Of all the different social networking sites to choose from—Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, etc.—I have identified Facebook as the best one for congregations to start with for three main reasons. First, it is used by the most people. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in December 2012 to discover which social networking site is the most popular. The findings of this survey are represented in Figure 1.¹⁴ Facebook is by far most popular—being utilized by 67% of internet users—standing head and shoulders above the second most popular, Twitter, at 16%. According to this study,

¹³Jerod Clark, *Facebook for Churches* [book on-line] (Church Juice/ ReFrame Media, 2012), http://churchjuice.reframedia.com/media/files/pdf/Facebook_Best_Practices_2012.pdf (accessed September 29, 2013), 3.

¹⁴ Maeve Duggan and Joanna Brenner, "The Demographics of Social Media Users—2012," *Pew Research Center*, February 14, 2013, <http://pewinternet.org/2013/02/14/the-demographics-of-social-media-users-2012> (accessed September 30, 2013).

virtually every single person who has a Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, or Tumblr account also has a Facebook account.

Although this survey was conducted in late 2012, practically a decade ago in web context, and Twitter had since gained some ground, the numbers are still lopsided. If a congregation wishes to use online visibility as a way to reach out to the unchurched in their community, Facebook is clearly the place to do that.

	% of internet users who...	The service is especially appealing to...
Use Any Social Networking Site	67	Adults ages 18-29, women
Use Facebook	67	Women, adults ages 18-29
Use Twitter	16	Adults ages 18-29, African-Americans, urban residents
Use Pinterest	15	Women, adults under 50, whites, those with some college education
Use Instagram	13	Adults ages 18-29, African-Americans, Latinos, women, urban residents
Use Tumblr	6	Adults ages 18-29

Figure 1

Secondly, Facebook is more functional than any other social medium for the user. Users have the ability not only post their own content, but they can also react to content from other users. This is what makes social media social. What separates Facebook as the preeminent platform is its three basic options for interaction: Like, Comment, and Share.¹⁵ These three actions are simple concepts and yet create boundless opportunities for connection. The “like” is the most basic and the most common. Facebook users like things nearly 3 billion times per day.¹⁶ Liking is a way a person shows approval for a particular post or page. Users can like content that their friends post, such as a photo album or a status update. They can also like the pages of their favorite entertainer,

¹⁵ For help understanding jargon, see Appendix 1. In most publications about Facebook, terms are typically capitalized (e.g. Like, News Feed, Timeline). However, I have decided to treat them mainly in the lowercase for readability purposes.

¹⁶ Mike Krumboltz, “Things you didn’t Know about the Facebook Like Button,” *Yahoo! Finance*, Feb 7, 2012, <http://www.finance.yahoo.com/news/things-you-didn't-know-about-the-facebook-like-button.html> (accessed November 20, 2013).

business, or institution such as Bob Dylan, Applebee's, or St. Paul's Lutheran Church. When users like a page, they are considered "fans" or "followers"¹⁷ and will receive content from that page in their news feeds as soon as they logon. This is significant for the congregation's Facebook evangelism strategy I am proposing, because much of its success relies on the involvement of a congregation's Facebook followers.

The "comment" function does not need as much explanation. It is a way for users to voice opinions about someone else's posted content. A user can do everything from congratulating a newly engaged couple by commenting on their engagement photos, to offering condolences for a loss by commenting on a heartbreaking status update. For Christians, it is essentially a means to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15).

The "share" is the function people use to spread content from a different source that they want others to see. Just about every news site has a feature to "Share this article on Facebook." The share option is what people use when they want their friends to read an article or see a photo that someone else has posted. Unlike liking, when users share content it becomes posted to their own profiles on their timelines and is more likely to be seen in the news feeds of their friends. If a congregation member finds a church page's post especially moving or important, this is the best option for him or her to show it to others. With these three options for the user—Like, Comment, Share—Facebook offers more ways for users to interact with each other than any other social networking service.

The third reason I recommend Facebook as the best option for churches is because Facebook is the most functional for the managers—called "admins"—who run the congregation's page. Nils Smith agrees: "Social media extends far beyond Facebook, but it's the best place to start because it is all-in-one."¹⁸ Figure 2¹⁹ was put together by Meredith Gould to illustrate this point.

¹⁷ The official name for users who Like a Page is "Fans." That seems counterintuitive for this paper, so I have elected the unofficial term "Followers" for consistent use.

¹⁸ Smith, *Social Media Guide for Ministry*, 37.

¹⁹ Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 14.

	Facebook	Blog	Instagram/ Pinterest	Twitter	YouTube/ Vimeo
Announcements	X	X		X	
Commemorating events	X	X	X		X
Conversations	X			X	
Evergreen information		X	X		X
Planning Events	X	X		X	
Reminders	X	X		X	
Stories		X	X		X
Time-Sensitive News	X			X	

Figure 2

Facebook allows page managers to publish just about any kind of content they can imagine. Evergreen information, which is content that doesn't need to be updated or refreshed, is the only area in which Facebook is lacking because content fades in popularity so quickly. With hundreds of posts from hundreds of friends every day congesting the newsfeed, it is imperative for a church page to update often so their posts don't get lost in the shuffle, but rather noticed and responded to. The other area of content that did not receive a checkmark from Gould is "stories." Her reason behind this is that Facebook users quickly lose interest in any one item, and that longer posts tend to be ignored. I'm not sure I agree with that. I agree that the best practice is to link longer texts into Facebook from a blog, the church website, or a different outside source, yet an attention-grabbing story written right into a Facebook post can certainly inspire curiosity, move hearts, and, ideally, spark interaction.

Project Proposal

Once a church decides on using Facebook, mapping out a plan is critical. The old adage, "If you're going to do it, do it right," holds true. An outdated Facebook page can drive prospects away just as easy as a well-maintained one can draw them in. Goals should be set. Techniques should be evaluated. This is where the marketing world could offer some value. Yet methodology, especially in the realm of marketing, should never be elevated above the means of grace. Of course, terms like "brand," "target market," and "consumer" should be approached and used with caution. In no way does a trendy Facebook page make the Word more efficacious, nor can a social media platform ever

replace actual face-to-face ministry. Social media will not create faith in the unbeliever, nor bring the unchurched into the Church. The message of a crucified and risen Christ does that. But the question is this: How can a good internet outreach strategy enhance or improve the way a congregation “markets” itself to the community, whereby creating opportunities to share that message?

To answer this question, I present this project. Rooted in scriptural principles and with a view toward trends in commercial and congregational marketing strategies, this project proposes a practical plan for congregations to use a Facebook page to reach out to the unchurched members of its community. This is functionally a five-step plan that consists of 1) getting the members involved, 2) looking presentable, 3) generating content, 4) using *Insights*, and 5) contacting prospects.

Literature Review

Although this is a relatively new area of ministry, there is much written about social media and church work in all different aspects. Typing the phrase “social media and ministry” into a search engine will produce thousands of tips from experts, theologically probing articles, and how-to videos. However, I have found nothing that is specifically about Facebook, specifically for the purpose of evangelism, and specifically from a Confessional Lutheran standpoint. In order to achieve a paper that fits those criteria, I draw from a variety of sources.

Jesse Rice’s *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community* is the premier work on the gravitational effect of Facebook and why people flock to it with such obsession—sometimes dangerously so. Rice breaks ground into the deep psychological and sociological needs of human beings and how those needs are met, albeit distortedly, by Facebook. From a Christian perspective, he explores the complex ways the consumer mentality fostered by social media affects both digital and personal relationships. In order for a church to proclaim law and gospel to its community through this digital space, it must understand why people of its community are on Facebook in the first place, and it must recognize the sins that often accompany Facebook usage. This is where *The Church of Facebook* is invaluable.

Meredith Gould is a sociologist who lends her skill set to online church marketing in her book *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*. Although doctrinally suspicious (at one point she cites the Word in John 1 as evidence of the power of communication instead of a testament to Jesus the God-man),²⁰ this book is sufficient to lay the groundwork beneath the internet outreach strategies of churches, and is referenced frequently in this paper.

For more practical, how-to type resources that cover Facebook in addition to many other social media sites, I have used two books: *Social Media Guide for Ministry: What it is and How to Use it* by Nils Smith, and *#Going Social: A Practical Guide on Social Media for Church Leaders* by Terrace Crawford. Neither probe psychological or theological matters deeply, but they offer more superficial tips on what works and what doesn't in digital church communication. A blog that offers similar insights is called "Internet Toolbox for Churches" maintained by Dave Hakes.

Marketing tips within the business world are easy to come by. "Social Media Expert" is apparently not a difficult title to achieve. Maybe I'm speaking from ignorance, but in this field, all resources seem fundamentally the same because there is only so much insight to be offered when all are looking at the same data. As helpful as they are, most articles that promise the "top x number of ways to expand your business on Facebook" essentially offer the same tips in a different order. That being said, most of my data analysis comes from a blog called "EdgeRank Checker" run by Chad Wittman.

The Appeal of Facebook

In order for congregations to effectively use Facebook for evangelism, they must first understand why so many people use it as often as they do. There are three distinct factors at play: the human need for home, the human need for community, and the shift in human communication. Each factor will impact how churches should utilize this social medium.

The Human Need for Home

Not long ago, people had their photos developed at the corner store. They brought them home and slipped them into the plastic sleeves of a photo album that would be

²⁰ Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 7.

placed on the shelf to be enjoyed for years to come. Believe it or not, these photo albums are the number one material possession that people say they would save from the flames should their homes catch fire.²¹ Photos hold a special place in our hearts. Now the practice of getting rolls of film developed has been replaced by uploading and storing those images on Facebook. Our most cherished possessions are now being kept in this digital space.

This is just one of many homelike qualities that Jesse Rice says appeal to Facebook users, bring them in, and keep them coming back. He says:

In a very short period of time (five years), a very large population (several hundred million and counting) has been synchronized (pulled into the orbit of a single Web platform called Facebook). And what kind of gravity is capable of accomplishing such a feat?

The human need for *home*.

It might sound a bit ridiculous. After all, who would claim to be looking for home in a social-networking site like Facebook? We just want a little mindless entertainment, for heaven's sake. But...home is exactly the kind of connection that Facebook is offering.²²

In addition to the storage of cherished photographs, Rice also cites the presence of family, the feeling of safety in a controlled environment, and the freedom to “just be yourself” as these qualities offered by Facebook that meet the human need for home.

How can a church apply this information in its strategy to reach out to people? Perhaps some pastors have discovered that American culture has become less accommodating to an in-home visit. Whether it is due to their busy schedules, compartmentalization of their relationships, or their fear of not having the house ready for company, people are simply less inclined to invite visitors inside than they used to be. Door-to-door evangelism is not dead, but it certainly is different. Can Facebook evangelism be thought of as an in-home visit in some sense?

I'm not suggesting that pastors should “Facebook stalk” every prospect, but basic information can be gleaned from their profiles. One visit to a person's profile could reveal their marital status, occupation, favorite activities, and opinions—anything that

²¹ Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 76.

²² Rice, *The Church of Facebook*, 50-51.

could break the ice when the time comes for face-to-face contact. Because everything that people find important is found in their online “home,” a pastor can use Facebook as the stethoscope—listening closely to the wants and needs of those around him.

The Human need for Community

The second factor that contributes to Facebook’s mass appeal is the human need for community. Like the first factor, this concept capitalizes on a shift in American culture. People leave their hometowns in pursuit of work, yet fewer companies are offering long-term jobs and benefits to anchor them. Bowling leagues that once offered a night of socializing have lost almost all their business. Civic organizations like Kiwanis and Lions Club have lost their appeal. People are less personally involved in their communities and have therefore lost touch with their friends and families along the way. Facebook puts them back in touch. In a book titled *iGods: How Technology Shapes our Spiritual and Social Lives*, Craig Detweiler writes “Facebook solved our human problem—connecting us in an era prone to depersonalization.”²³

The irony is that social media contributes to the same problem it solves. Facebook has aided in this depersonalization while at the same time replacing the classic sense of human connection. We know about major events in the lives of our friends long before we speak to them in person because we read their announcements on Facebook. It has forced a medium between people who at one time enjoyed an immediate relationship, yet there is a sort of “community feel” to Facebook.

How can a congregation participate in this digital community? Maybe the most influential way is to simply be present, recognizing that Facebook is the new marketplace where people gather to socialize. A church participates in the community by proclaiming law and gospel and by serving those around them. A web presence requires that the church’s Facebook page will post content and engage its followers often, so that its message remains a part of everyday communal life. In an article published in *Christian Century*, Lenora Rand writes:

These days, however, given the busyness of our lives and the distances we're separated from each other and from our church buildings, we also need the virtual

²³ Craig Detweiler, *iGods: How Technology Shapes our Spiritual and Social Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013), 140.

church. We live in a world in which it takes a lot of commitment to carve out an hour or so on Sunday morning to meet with others for worship, and in this kind of world we need the Facebook and Twitter church, where on a daily basis we can confess our sins, weep together and laugh together, know the intimate details of one another's lives and pray for one another in very specific ways.²⁴

I am not advocating replacing the local church with a virtual church, as Rand seems to be. The encouragement to “not give up meeting together” in Hebrews 10:25 calls us to overcome busyness and (reasonable) distance to gather to worship in person. All digital replications fall short of real, present, local fellowship. But Rand is on the right track. Although this paper focuses on the outreach potential on Facebook, a congregation should aim higher than simply marketing itself. They should cultivate a Christ-centered community within this global community and build genuine relationships that draw people closer to each other, to their Savior, and to his Word. This type of community will serve as an organic means of marketing toward online visitors, rather than a forced one.

The Shift in Human Communication

When the first website was created, all the programmer could do was place words on a screen. An online user could read those words, but nothing else. Then after a while email accounts were added to websites that allowed online users to carry on a conversation through email exchanges. This process was slow, but slightly more interactive than before. As people desired more instantaneous communication, services like instant messaging became popular—allowing people to exchange messages without the need to email. Still, this form of communication happened in a closed environment between person A and person B. This season in the life of the internet is known as “Web 1.0.”²⁵

Then there was a major shift in the way people communicate. A desire to share photos and other content with many people at once gave way to social media. “Web 1.0” transitioned into what is now “Web 2.0.” The internet is no longer simply for disseminating information from one person to another, but it is an interactive conversation among millions of people around the world. This is what draws millions of

²⁴ Lenora Rand, "The Church on Facebook: Why we Need Virtual Community," *Christian Century* 126 no. 13 (June 30, 2009), 22.

²⁵ Caston, *The iChurch Method*, 122-123.

people to “check Facebook” several times every day. They are compelled to logon to see if anyone messaged them, liked their photos, commented on their status, posted something funny, or requested their friendship.

This fundamental shift from using the internet as a means of one-way communication to using it for instantaneous interaction means that churches must find a way to keep up. Richard Vosko writes:

How can church leaders not take advantage of social media? This is not a reference to websites that serve merely as electronic business cards or church bulletins. The churches that value connectivity with their members have created interactive websites and blogs; they are linked into Twitter and Facebook; they post news, schedules, discussion questions, and directions; they provide connections to other resources and post sermons and lectures that can be downloaded and shared.²⁶

Vosko’s observations will come into play in Step 3 of this proposed plan when a congregation evaluates what type of content to generate on Facebook. But for now, it is enough to say that understanding why the style of communication offered by Facebook is so enthralling will shape the way a church’s page interacts with users.

How Facebook Pages Work for Business

A well-known internet strategist, Jordan Raynor, observes about social media: "It has never been easier to be as influential as you can be today. Information is cheap. Information is easier to produce. And if you have a quality message, it's never been cheaper to get out."²⁷ Churches have a message of the highest quality; so how can they get any elbow room on Facebook with all the other cheap information already flooding this space? Perhaps a view toward business-marketing strategies could offer some help.

I will start with the basics. Brands, companies, and other entities use pages to connect with prospects on Facebook. The difference between a page and a profile is important. A profile is intended for individuals to use and requires friend requests to be

²⁶ Vosko, “Liturgical Technology, Social Media, and the Green Church,” 91.

²⁷ Mike Memoli, “Online Strategy Fuels Brown Surge,” *Real Clear Politics*, January 19, 2010, http://realclearpolitics.com/politics_nation/2010/01/online_strategy_fuels_brown_su.html (accessed November 21, 2013).

sent and accepted in order for interaction to take place. A page is intended for corporations and businesses, and only requires a “like” for users to follow the page and receive its posts. Churches should use pages.

The measurement of interaction—likes, comments, and shares—that a page receives from its followers is called “engagement.” The measurement of unique people who have seen the page’s posts as a result of engagement is called “reach.” These are two key concepts in Facebook marketing. When engagement goes up, reach goes further. Therefore the key to reaching the most people is by creating content that will receive engagement. That is the mark that this paper aims for, and is the subject of every social media marketing resource available.

Because there is so much content posted by friends and pages, Facebook uses a complex algorithm to select which content actually goes into the news feed of any particular user. If this didn’t exist, there would be no time for reading anything in the news feed because it would refresh with new content so quickly. This algorithm is largely based on the amount of engagement a post receives. As a result, only about 12% of the page’s followers will originally view the posted content in their news feeds.²⁸ But when one follower engages with the content—either by liking, commenting, or sharing—that content gets boosted higher on the algorithm’s priority list and it reaches more news feeds. The resulting story would look like something like this in the news feed:

Steve Waldschmidt likes Applebee’s photo album “BBQ Wings”

Then the friends who see that story could also view Applebee’s album right there in the news feed. If it were a church’s content receiving this type of engagement, the story would look like this:

Steve Waldschmidt likes St. Paul’s Lutheran Church’s photo album “VBS 2014”

Perhaps the friends who see this story and look at the album will think, “That looks like fun. I’ll have to bring my kids next to that next time. I will like the page so I know about the next event they have.” This is just one illustration to emphasize the importance of both the quality and the quantity of the page’s posts.

²⁸ Chad Wittman, “Average Facebook Page Reaches 12.6%,” *EdgeRank Checker*, October 29, 2013, <http://edgerankchecker.com/blog/2013/10/average-facebook-page-reaches-12-6> (accessed February 2, 2014).

Therefore, with every post, there should be a clear understanding of what the content is designed to do. This is where the business-marketing world offers helpful insight for churches. There is no shortage of readily available resources on social media marketing.²⁹ Steve Smith ran a study on how to measure the value of a Facebook user's experience with online brands.

It arises from this spread of experiences that, when designing a brand's strategy for Facebook, a brand owner needs to decide which activities they want people who encounter their content across different media to undertake. For example, generating curiosity via Facebook can be particularly important to media brand owners. A newspaper publisher is likely to want to create curiosity through news stories on Facebook in order to drive people to its website on which ads for other brands appear.³⁰

Truly, the church is not a business. Jesus is not a brand that needs to be made more appealing for consumers. Yet this concept of determining the desired result is an important one. Is the purpose solely to gain "likes?" Is the purpose to foster spiritual growth? Is the purpose to get more people into the pew? Is the target audience members or prospects? The answers to these questions will influence what kind of content and vocabulary the church uses in its page posts. A focused, intentionalized approach in every post will separate the church's message from the clutter.

Usage within American Christianity

The number of Christian churches in America that use Facebook has risen dramatically in the past two years, from 57% to 70%, according to a study by the Barna Group.³¹ As the adoption rate increased, so has the perceived value of Facebook. The same study revealed that the percentage of pastors who predict social media would be a major part of the church's ministry over the next two years has risen from 51% in 2011 to 65% in 2013.

²⁹ <https://facebook.com/GetFreeInternetMarketingEbooks>

³⁰ Steve Smith, "Conceptualising and Evaluating Experiences with Brands on Facebook," *International Journal of Market Research* 55, no. 3 (March 2012): 357-374, 360.

³¹ Barna Group, "The Rise of the @Pastor," *Barna Group*, June 12, 2013) <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/congregations/615-the-rise-of-the-pastor> (accessed November 18, 2013).

Because this survey includes heterodox churches, a Confessional Lutheran may wonder if the high view of social media stems from a low view of the means of grace. This might very well be the case. Many Evangelicals do elevate the relevancy of their programs over the efficacy of the Word. Yet that does not mean the methodologies they find useful could not also be useful for orthodox churches with a high view of Word and sacrament. The use of social media is one of those methodologies handled well by Evangelicals and could be adopted by a Confessional church body without compromising doctrinal integrity.

That is something to think about when forming and evaluating a Facebook strategy. As cringe-worthy as it might be to see the Reformed doctrine or social gospel oozing from their pages, look at churches that are successful on social media to see what they are doing right. Observe the quality of their pages and the way they spark engagement from their followers. Looking at other churches' Facebook pages will at least provide a basic understanding of how a church page works, if not also a handful of ideas to implement.

Usage within WELS

As a whole, our synod is slightly behind the curve when it comes to Facebook presence. Only 53% of WELS churches currently utilize this platform. Again, those who do not use it should judge what motivates their decision. If a congregation evaluates their motives, the scriptural principals of evangelism, as well as their resources and they ultimately decide to focus their outreach in areas other than Facebook, God be praised. Facebook is not the be-all and end-all of a congregation's outreach strategy, nor should it be. Yet the advantages that a Facebook presence offers should be considered in that decision making process. Is this the process the other 47% of our churches have gone through to arrive at their conclusion? Do they simply dismiss it as menial or unimportant? Do they assess the impact it could have on their relationships with each other and with their community? Congregational leadership should consider these questions in light of the Great Commission before they decide whether or not to move forward with a Facebook page.

	% of churches on Facebook	Average number of followers
All of WELS	53	99
Home Missions	67	109
Top 50 Fastest Growing	80	265

Figure 4

Figure 4³² compares the percentage of two categories of mission-minded congregations using Facebook with the synod as a whole. Churches that are considered Home Missions are typically oriented toward outreach. They are using Facebook far more frequently than the total WELS average because they see the value it has for evangelism.

The fact deserving of more attention is that of the 50 WELS churches with the most total gains in membership in 2012, 40 utilize Facebook. This should really be the statistic that sways a pastor who is on the fence about using Facebook. Recognizably growing churches are 27% more likely to use Facebook than the average WELS church. What does that mean? Of course, it would be foolish to spell out a cause-and-effect relationship between Facebook and growth, but this is what congregations with outward signs of growth *are* doing. They are showing people that they care about meeting them where they are. They are recognizing the need to have a visible presence where many people are spending exorbitant amounts of time.

I am not sure what to make of the whopping jump in followers between the average WELS church and one of the “Top 50.” Noting that the criterion for “fastest growing” was total gains and not percentage of growth, these questions arise: Do they have more followers simply because they have more members, or do they have more

³² “All of WELS” is represented by a sample size of 200 churches chosen at random. “Home Missions” is defined as churches that received funding from the Board for Home Missions in 2012, not counting mission startups in the past year, for a total sample size of 156. “Top 50 Fastest Growing” is determined by WELS churches with the most total gains in 2012 as recorded in the WELS statistical report for that year. The method of identifying which churches use Facebook was 1) typing the church’s name and city into the Facebook search bar, and 2) if the search yielded no results, going to the church’s website in search of a link to a Facebook page. Research conducted in September-October, 2013.

followers because their online community attracts prospects to like their page? Whatever the cause, these churches have done two things: 1) cultivated an online community as an extension of their local, congregational community, and 2) have seen their congregation grow in numbers. Whether one of these things has happened because of or in light of the other, I do not know.

The number of followers for Home Missions also raises a question. Some of them have more Facebook followers than they have baptized members. Sure, these followers might be former classmates of the pastor or MLC students from Travel-Canvass-Witness teams, but what if they are prospects in the community? Whatever the size of the following, or “fan base” as it is properly called, churches of all sizes can use Facebook to augment their outreach strategy. This five-step plan can help them do that.

Proposed Plan

The suggestions for this proposed strategy are based on just one year of experience administrating a church’s Facebook page, but also on personal observations and much research. This is the five-step plan:

1. Get the Members Involved.
2. Look Presentable.
3. Generate both Created and Curated Content.
4. Use *Insights*.
5. Contact Prospects.

These are not necessarily five chronological steps. Each stage in the plan is really an ongoing process. There is no end to encouraging members to get involved or to contacting prospects. Looking presentable requires consistent attention. *Insights*, which will be explained, helps decide what type of content to generate. Therefore the organization of the five steps is more about illustrating the move from the primary audience to the target audience—from the churched to the unchurched—than it is about a linear sequence of tasks.³³

The strategies presented presuppose the actual setup of a Business Page.³⁴ Pages are managed by admins, which in a church’s case might be the pastor, but it could be

³³ See Appendix 2 for a visual summary of the five steps.

³⁴ Here is Facebook’s starting point for pages: <http://facebook.com/business/build>.

anyone who is willing and able. Facebook allows for multiple admins to have access to varying degrees of control over the page. Perhaps a congregation could appoint a “Social Media Team” of leaders that could take turns posting different types of content at different times.

Step 1: *Get the Members Involved*

This first step, getting members involved, is the most vital step to any kind of success on Facebook. Word of mouth is always the strongest form of advertising. Who cares what a church says about itself? What the people are saying is far more important. In the business world, the Facebook stat that is often thrown around is that 80% of consumers say they are more likely to try new things based on a suggestion by a friend on social media.³⁵ The power of Facebook lies within the hands of the users.

When asked if there had ever been a visitor at worship who heard about the church through Facebook, one WELS pastor told me, “Yes. But it doesn’t come from our posting. It comes from church attendees organically talking about our church on Facebook.”³⁶

In a world that has become more depersonalized, personal evangelism is a struggle for many Christians. Speaking in person about faith is intimidating for a lot of members. Any pastor who has seen a low turnout for a congregational canvass afternoon can attest to that. Yet on Facebook, sharing faith is as easy as clicking the “share” button. Inviting people to church is as simple as writing about the experience in a status update. It is a comfortable, low-risk, non-confrontational form of “Come and See” evangelism, and could be a springboard into a deeper understanding of what it means to be a part of the universal priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9).

With all of that in mind, this step involves letting the congregation know exactly what the plans are for the church’s Facebook strategy. A simple announcement during Bible Class or even after worship would suffice. Include a “Find us on Facebook” logo in

³⁵ CMO Council. *Social Brand Experience* [book on-line] (CMO Council/Lithium, 2011) <http://lithium.com/pdfs/whitepapers/CMO-Council-Social-Brand-Experience-u5OE7SiZ.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2013).

³⁶ Response to an email survey, November 2013.

print on the weekly bulletin and digitally on the church website.³⁷ Invite the members who are on Facebook to like the congregation's page and encourage them to interact with the church's posts by liking, commenting on, and especially sharing the content posted by the church. Clue the members into the potential impact their interaction could have on their friends who see that activity.

Leaders from many congregations are beginning to discover the value of getting the people involved in witnessing on Facebook. I surveyed 17 WELS churches that I have identified as ones that use Facebook well.³⁸ I asked them, "What advantages do you see in using Facebook for evangelism?" Their responses reinforce the significance of this step:

Members can easily share event posts and other posts with friends. It is another avenue for word of mouth connections.

Our church posts a notice about an event, and all the members have to do is repost or share, and they have instantly invited everyone they know on Facebook to take part in an event or worship service at our church.

It makes use of trusted connections—friends—that make the unchurched person more likely to inquire further or explore the campaign.

Ask any pastor. The most effective way to get people to your church is through friendship evangelism—members inviting their friends...Facebook is all about friends!

Our mission with Facebook is to use it as an extension of our mission to spread the gospel. We always make it about the event/information combined with the message of the Word. It reaches a lot of our congregation and they can use it to be witnesses themselves very easily.³⁹

³⁷ The official Facebook logos, banners, and badges can be downloaded here: <http://facebookbrand.com>.

³⁸ The standards by which these churches were selected were fairly subjective. I took into account the number of followers, the frequency and variety of posts, the appearance of the page itself, and what I have perceived in general as a concerted effort put into the church's page. Some survey responders were pastors, while others were lay members in charge of administering the Facebook page. 20 churches were surveyed; 17 responded.

³⁹ For a more extensive list of responses to this question, see Appendix 3. Responses are anonymous.

Ask the members to think about the possibilities. Who might see this engagement with their congregation? Maybe it's a friend from an exercise class or a fellow mom from daycare who is looking for a new church. Maybe it's a brother who was confirmed by that church but stopped attending as a teenager. Maybe it's a coworker who was never interested in church but now just might visit one Sunday because of the positive things she reads the member saying about it in her news feed.

Step 2: Look Presentable

Pastors recognize the importance of first impressions. The church sign should be visible and readable. The parking lot should be well lit and maintained. The narthex should be vacuumed and tidy. Everything should look presentable for not only the members, but also the first-time visitors. First impressions of the church's Facebook page are also very important. It needs to be presentable.

A March 2012 study found that on average only 2% of Facebook users will return to a brand's page after their first visit. If they like the page, most of their interaction will be through the updates and posted content that show up in their news feed.⁴⁰ What they see when they first view the page will heavily impact their decision on whether or not to like it.

With that in mind, the most eye-catching part of the page is the cover photo. This is the 851x315 pixel image at the top of the page. People expect an image in this space, or else they will assume the page has not been updated since the cover photo feature was introduced to Facebook in 2012. There are many articles readily available on the web for the "do's and don'ts" of cover photos, but the overarching axiom is to make it count. Make sure it is sized correctly. Make sure it beautifies the page. Make sure it communicates the kind of message the church wants to send. For in depth examples and critiques, Jerod Clark's free ebook *Facebook for Churches* is a good resource.

The profile picture is the smaller image (180x180 pixels) that is just beneath and to the left of the cover photo. The profile picture serves as the image that accompanies posts, comments, and content created by the page. Unlike a personal profile picture that

⁴⁰ Clark, *Facebook for Churches*, 10.

gets replaced just about every time the user takes a selfie,⁴¹ the page's profile picture should remain constant for the sake of continuity. Perhaps this will most likely be the best use for the church's logo, assuming the logo is of high quality and professionally created.

The way the cover photo and profile picture work together is important. They should not both be images of the same thing. The most common practice is to make one the logo and the other a photograph of the church building. Some churches keep the profile picture consistently either the logo or a shot of the steeple, while rotating the cover photo to represent current sermon series, seasons of the church year, or upcoming events. The best practice is to change the cover photo regularly, change the profile picture rarely, but never depict the same thing in both images. Dynamic images that complement each other and grab attention will make the page more presentable.

Ideally the church would enlist the services of a graphic designer from time to time for attractive and meaningful images that can be used for the cover photo, profile picture, or any other artwork on the web. Although space is rarely made in the budget for graphic design, hiring a professional can make a big difference in making the church's website and social media pages look presentable.

Page presentation is another reason it is so important to update content often. There is a temptation to neglect the page after it is up and running for a while. If the last post was a link to the PDF of a sermon manuscript in 2009, the page is going to look outdated. Conversely, if the visitor sees consistent interaction with members and a variety of post types, he or she is more likely drawn to that community.⁴² Yet the goal is not to post simply for the sake of posting, it is to reach people. Keeping this goal in mind will make the work of generating content seem less like busywork and more like Great Commission work.

Along the same line, the number of followers is displayed prominently underneath the cover photo. If there are only six followers, the visitor is going to assume there isn't

⁴¹ Oxford Dictionaries declared "Selfie"—a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website—as the Word of the Year in 2013.

⁴² Dave Hakes, "Why Churches Need to Post Regularly (Don't let this Happen to You)," *Internet Toolbox for Churches*, 2013, <http://internettoolboxforchurches.com/why-churches-need-to-post-regularly> (accessed February 2, 2014).

much offered by the page and will wonder why that church is even on Facebook. Perhaps the page admins could beef up this number just a little bit in the beginning stages by inviting their own friends and family members to like the page. Even though the pastor's cousin from a different state is not the target audience, building up the number of followers—even to 30 or 40—will show signs of life to visitors from the target audience.

When sharing links, simply copying and pasting the entire link into a post makes the page look cluttered. A post with ten lines of a nonsensical sequence of characters is distracting to the visitor. Running the links through Bitly⁴³ or a similar link-shortening service will help keep the page clean and presentable, and will prevent distractions from the main message of each individual post.

This step of making the page look presentable really just comes down to common sense. It doesn't take a keen eye for design, just a little sensibility. Again, look around at what other churches are doing on Facebook. What looks good? What doesn't? Take note of the pages that are especially attractive and think of ways to incorporate those elements into the congregation's page.

Step 3a: *Create Content*

Step 3 is about generating content. If a church does not give people a reason to come back to its page every day, it won't be long before they forget about it. Content plus consistency equals readership. Content really is king, and making sure there is always new content is key.⁴⁴

This step is divided into two parts because there are fundamentally two ways to generate content. Meredith Gould explains: "Either you develop and post original material or find existing goodies to share with others. People who develop original online content are called 'content creators.' Those trolling the internet for interesting and useful tidbits are known as 'content curators.'"⁴⁵ At times, the pastor or page admin will need to be both.

⁴³ <http://bitly.com>

⁴⁴ Terrace Crawford, *#Going Social: A Practical Guide on Social Media for Church Leaders* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 130.

⁴⁵ Gould, *The Social Media Gospel*, 42.

The easiest and most obvious content to create is an announcement. It is instinctive, especially for someone unfamiliar with the nature of social media, to simply write:

Worship this Sunday is at 10:30. All are welcome.

It is true that Facebook is an efficient way to make these kinds of announcements. Sometimes it is the only way to get that message to people who do not regularly attend worship. But remember the shift in communication from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Social media is not simply for disseminating information; it is for interaction. If a church wants to reach the friends of its followers, it needs to create content that will spark a reaction so that it ends up in their friends' news feed. A simple statement will not garner many likes, comments, or shares.

Perhaps that announcement could be geared more toward visitors and supplemented by more information about the service or sermon theme. For example:

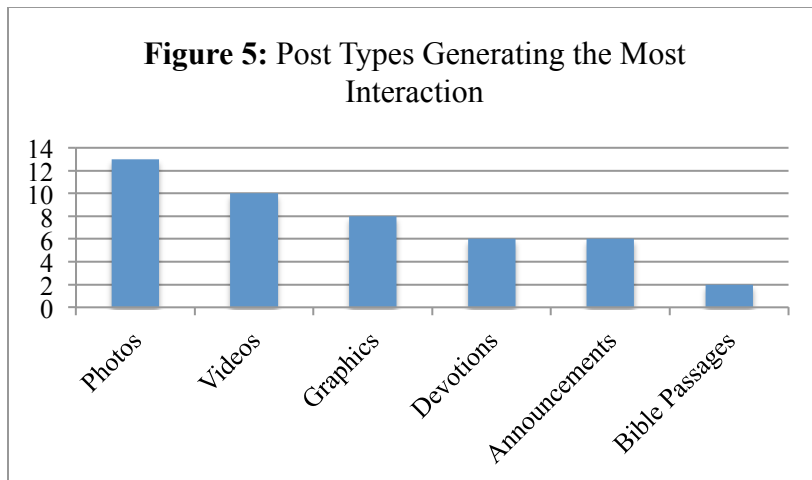
Join us at 10:30 this Sunday to learn about Christ's role as our King!

Obviously, exclamation points can be overdone and even sound sarcastic if used in every single announcement. Variety can be found even in simple announcements with a little creativity on the part of the admin:

What kind of King is Jesus? Find out this Sunday at 10:30.

Sometimes Facebook needs to serve as a bulletin board, yet framing those announcements in a way that touches emotions will invoke curiosity and yield results in terms of reach.

Even with creative phrasing, announcements often do little for engagement. One of the questions I asked when I surveyed the 17 WELS churches was, "What kinds of posts typically generate the most reactions (Likes, Comments, Shares, etc.)?" The results of that question are illustrated in Figure 5.



Although this is an admittedly minute sample size, these findings underscore a basic marketing principle: visual content gets more interaction than plain text. The eyes are drawn much more easily to a photograph than to a paragraph. A video in the Timeline forces a reader to assess whether or not to watch it. A graphic for a sermon series or event will visually convey a message with more impact than a sentence will.

It may be of some concern that Bible passages fared poorly in this survey. After all, isn't the purpose to publish and proclaim God's Word? Isn't Scripture the most important thing we could possibly share with our friends? Yes, but in the context of social media, a bare Scripture verse may seem out of context. That being said, I think posting a passage from the upcoming lessons has more value than displayed by Figure 5. If the pastor is the page admin, his mind is already on those passages from his text study anyway. Why not post the most inspirational, the most thought provoking, or the most comforting verse from the sermon text?

Posting photos, as supported by this survey, will garner many likes, shares, and comments. Typically the more vibrant the image is, the more engagement it will receive. A picture taken from the balcony of the congregation standing and singing a hymn is more compelling than a picture taken from the balcony of an empty sanctuary. A photo that captures the emotions on a child's face as she colors the nativity scene in Sunday school is more lively than a zoomed-out shot of all the children coloring.

This does take a certain amount of artful creativity. If the page admin does not have the equipment or the imagination to create those kinds of images, help should be

gleaned from people in the congregation who do. If there is someone with that kind of gift, this is an opportunity for him or her to serve.

Yet not every photograph has to be expertly produced. Candid shots posted in real time can generate interest and even boost attendance. Smartphones and mobile devices make it possible to post photos of events as they happen. Post photos of a child playing games at the Fall Festival. Post action shots of the grade school basketball game. Post a picture of the youth group washing cars with the phrase, “*Bring your dirty cars to the Youth Group Car Wash until 2:00.*” This is a fun way to let people see all the things the church is offering and it could even get people to show up at those events.

On the subject of the mobile device, page admins cannot use the normal Facebook app. There is a free app called “Pages” that allows admins to manage the page from smartphones and tablets. Studies show that content posted from a mobile app actually receives more engagement than through the traditional website.⁴⁶

Due to the nature of the world we live in, it is against the law to post images of minors without their parent’s permission. Nils Smith explains:

Legally, you cannot show any ‘recognizable’ photo of a child, which means that you can post a photo from the back of a head or if their face is blurred. The best practice is always to protect yourself and the children in your ministry by having written permission from the parents of every minor whose picture you might show on your website or on any social media.⁴⁷

This is simply a matter of asking the parents. Most of them would be more than willing to give permission and will appreciate the safety precaution. The easiest way to go about this is to include a short paragraph asking for permission along with a signature line in the registration packets for the grade school, Vacation Bible School, and youth group. It is a slight hurdle to jump, but it’s worth it to be able to show the community that the church is a safe and inviting place for children by posting pictures of them having fun on social media.

⁴⁶ Chad Wittman, “Posting from Mobile Increases Engagement, but not Reach.” *EdgeRank Checker*, August 5, 2013, <http://edgerankchecker.com/blog/2013/08/posting-from-mobile-increases-engagement-but-not-reach> (accessed November 29, 2013).

⁴⁷ Smith, *Social Media Guide for Ministry*, 76.

Video content is more difficult to create. Most churches do not have the means to produce a quality video; so original video content is normally restricted to recorded sermons and candid clips recorded on a smartphone. That's okay. Recorded sermons occasionally receive decent interaction, and both *Vimeo* and *YouTube* embed neatly into a Facebook post. Simply plug in the link from any uploaded content on those sites and the video will play right there in the timeline or news feed. Short clips of children practicing for the Christmas concert, for example, are received well by parents and grandparents.

When there is a drought in engagement with typical posts, asking the followers a question is an interactive way to get back on track. After all, social media is supposed to be social. Let the people participate in and connect with the church right there on the page. A well-thought question will initiate interaction. Facebook allows two ways to do this: simply typing an open-ended question as the status update, or using a poll with multiple choices. An example of the former would look like this:

What have you been reading for devotions this summer?

The strengths here are that users get to create their own responses, articulate their own opinions, and share their own experiences. The weakness is the potential fear people have for opening themselves up to criticism if they answer “incorrectly.”

This example of a poll from an article on *Internet Toolbox for Churches* is interesting:

What's your favorite church Christmas Activity?

- a. Decorate-the-church day*
- b. Christmas Brunch*
- c. Christmas VBS*
- d. Christmas caroling⁴⁸*

Notice how this poll question does not list “worship” as a choice. That would be the response that everyone would feel compelled to choose because it is recognizably the answer that *should* be chosen. Removing the obvious answer is a good way to level the field. Polls eliminate the fears people may have of answering incorrectly, and are more

⁴⁸ Emily Shoaff, “How to Ask Facebook Questions that Trigger Conversation,” *Internet Toolbox For Churches*, 2013, <http://www.internettoolboxforchurches.com/how-to-ask-facebook-page-questions> (accessed November 29, 2013).

likely to garner responses than open questions. Plus, a poll like this could help cut down on unnecessary programs that don't receive much positive feedback.

Both of the above examples are geared toward churchgoing members. Here are a few more noteworthy examples from the same article that would appeal to a broader audience:

Have you ever had a friend invite you to church? Did you go?

Have you ever invited a friend to church? What did they say?

Would you rather spend a whole week glued to a computer or spend a whole week without the internet? (This one isn't even church related, but some of these can work well as icebreakers for new visitors, who could be on your page at any time.)

The key here is to ask questions that are relevant; alternating the target audience between the church's members and visitors to the page. Consider the goal in asking questions. Is it solely to increase engagement? Is it to gather feedback? Is it to start a conversation? Answering these questions will reveal what questions should be asked of the Facebook audience.

Use discernment when telling the Facebook audience what specific action they should take on a post. Here are two examples:

SHARE the good news of Jesus with someone today.

The first 20 people to LIKE this status will receive a free mug with our new logo.

Once in a while this approach is permissible, but if it happens too often it will be perceived as shameless pandering.⁴⁹ The audience will see right through it. People already know what to do with content they appreciate on Facebook. Focus on creating compelling content that will organically spread through news feeds without a prompt.

Step 3b: Curate Content

Sometimes it is good to be a content curator. It requires less work than creating content and it gives the followers something new for a change. Because quality videos and photographs are difficult for many churches to create, curating them from other sources is common practice. If they come from non-WELS, Christian sources, it is wise

⁴⁹ To see examples of the type of pandering to avoid, visit <https://facebook.com/JesusDaily>

to use a word or two of clarification, so as not to give the impression that the church agrees with any false doctrine, supports any ministry, or promotes any products depicted in the photo or video. Also, credit should be given where credit is due when images come from different sources, so as not to infringe on any copyright laws.

There are sources within our fellowship that are excellent for providing content that can be easily shared. The most useful is the official *WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod)* Facebook page.⁵⁰ From my survey of the 17 churches, 10 of them reported that they share content from there. It posts the daily devotions from the synod website, announcements and synod news, as well as thoughtful and timely articles, mostly from *Forward in Christ*. Plus, most of their posts are accompanied by professional photos and graphics. Curating their content could help the church's followers stay informed on the direction in which their church body as a whole is heading, as well as keeping them nourished with God's Word from the daily devotional.

If the pastor or page admin feels it would be good for its Facebook followers to learn more about mission work—both home and world—*WELS Kingdom Workers*⁵¹ has a Facebook page that provides plenty of sharable content. Learning stories from missionaries and the far-away lives they touch with the gospel broadens the Christian reader's perspective of what it means to be a part of the Church. Especially heartwarming articles and pictures will receive plenty of shares, likes, and comments.

*Martin Luther College*⁵² and *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*⁵³ each do a fine job of maintaining their Facebook pages with announcements and updates about academic, extracurricular, and student life. Prep schools and area Lutheran high schools also do this, although their posts seem to come less often than those of MLC and WLS. Sharing content from these schools would be helpful in keeping followers and members informed about the students they support with their offerings and prayers.

Another popular page that churches in our circles often share content from is

⁵⁰ <http://facebook.com/welslutherans>

⁵¹ <http://facebook.com/welskingdomworkers>

⁵² <http://facebook.com/mlcwels>

⁵³ <http://facebook.com/pages/Wisconsin-Lutheran-Seminary/147818817430>

called *Bread For Beggars*,⁵⁴ even though it is basically a content curator itself—collecting and sharing content from other artists, bloggers, and pastors. This is the description written in the “About” section: “Bread for Beggars is a Christ-centered, multi-media devotional, which serves those looking to be fed and nourished by Him on a daily basis.” They share high quality photos, graphics, and videos, insightful blog articles, and gospel predominant sermons from WELS pastors. It is worth noting that some of their content, as Christ-centered as it is, may only be interesting to specific audiences (e.g. many blog posts are about how certain super-hero movies parallel Christian life). The congregation’s page admin should take into account the demographic of their church’s target audience when deciding what content to share, and *Bread for Beggars* supplies a wide variety.

Although maintained by WELS members and followed by over 200,000 Facebook users worldwide, one page that somehow goes practically unnoticed by most WELS churches is called *He Loved Us First*.⁵⁵ It posts various types of artwork from various sources every week that pertain to that week’s lectionary readings. Most of it is unique and rarely seen elsewhere. Keeping in mind that most people are visual learners, perhaps a local church’s Facebook page would be wise to use this artwork in connection with the upcoming Scripture lessons and sermon.

*Time of Grace*⁵⁶ and *WhatAboutJesus.com*,⁵⁷ along with the *WELS* page, each upload daily devotions. Some church pages choose to share a devotion every day from one of these sources. Some church pages share them on a rotating basis. These are both good practices, especially since most pastors do not take the time to create their own daily devotion, but there should be a word of warning here. If a church page only posts the *Time of Grace* devotions every day, what is it offering to its followers? What is keeping the audience from “unfollowing” that church and just following *Time of Grace*? If a church does share daily devotions from one of these pages, it should really be creating its own posts at least three to five times per week in addition to those devotions.

⁵⁴ <http://facebook.com/breadforbeggars>

⁵⁵ <http://facebook.com/HeLovedUsFirst>

⁵⁶ <http://facebook.com/timeofgrace>

⁵⁷ <http://facebook.com/pages/WhatAboutJesuscom/432913275014>

Curating content is a great way to participate in the larger community of our church body. For example, if a congregation has members actively involved in Lutheran Women’s Missionary Society, perhaps it would be good to share some of the content from that organization’s Facebook page.⁵⁸ It is also a good idea to interact with other nearby WELS churches by liking their pages and sharing some of their posts. Yet shared content is not to be restricted to the goings on of synodical institutions or to structured devotions. The internet is full of items that pertain to the faith and life of congregational members.

Whatever topic is relevant in the minds of the people could be explored and discussed on a Facebook page. Maybe news sites are the best place to draw content from. If a pastor finds photos of the damage caused by a tsunami in the Philippines, he could share it with the phrase “*These people need our prayers.*” If he finds an editorial piece about a pending Supreme Court decision, he could share it along with a few words of why the outcome of that ruling matters.

Perhaps this is an area where pastors get a little nervous—worrying about what members or visitors are going to say about hot-button issues like a presidential election or same-sex marriage—and maybe rightfully so. What if a member misrepresents Scripture? What if a visitor writes hurtful things? Maybe some topics are best left reserved for a controlled environment like Bible class, but what percentage of members are attending Bible class? How often is there a visitor? It is time to take these discussions to where the people are. Certainly there may come a point where the pastor has to say, “Can we meet to talk about this in person?” But when visitors to a Facebook page see an active community concerned for real life topics, they are drawn in to explore further exactly what that church has to say, and more importantly, what God’s Word has to say. This is why opening up for discussion content from secular sources is beneficial for the Facebook audience.

There should always be a balance between content that is created and content that is curated. If there is too much content created by the page admins—especially if the pastor is the only one—users may become bored with one particular style. If there is too much content shared from other sources, the users may find the page pointless. The best

⁵⁸ <http://facebook.com/LWMS.WELS>

rule of thumb might be a 3:1 ratio—three posts of created content for every post of curated content. This ratio would allow the church page to keep users engaged with its own content without becoming dull, while offering content from other pages without becoming superfluous. In addition to the monotony factor, original content fares much higher in Facebook’s news feed algorithm than copied content. Followers are exponentially more likely to see what is created by the page than what is curated.⁵⁹

Step 4: Use Insights

Facebook offers an invaluable tool to its page admins. It is called “Insights” and it is found in the admin panel at the top of the page’s home screen. *Insights* essentially displays what is working and what is not, tracking how often each posted item is liked, shared, or commented on. This is where the stethoscope and the megaphone intersect. *Insights* is a tool that will allow the admin to listen closely to what the followers want to hear so that the megaphone becomes more clear.

For example, Figure 6 graphs the number of people reached by a church’s page in November 2013. This particular congregation has around 300 members and has 107 Facebook followers. Notice the large spike on November 11th. This was a photo album of an event held in the school’s gymnasium on Veterans Day. This post reached 202 people on that one day.

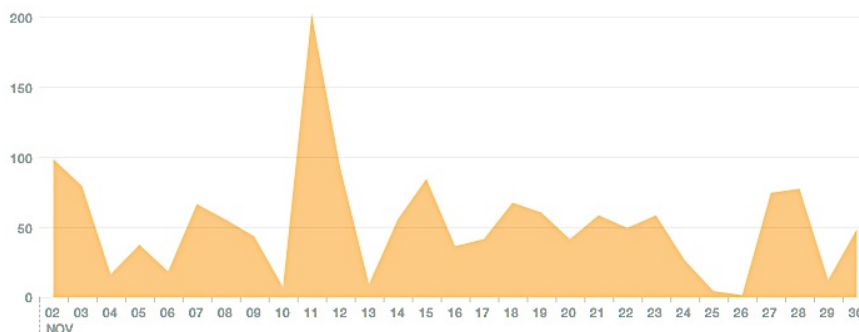


Figure 6

⁵⁹ Chad Wittman, “Facebook Kills Viral Reach When Sharing Other Page’s Posts,” *Edgerank Checker*, August 29, 2013, <http://edgerankchecker.com/blog/2013/08/facebook-kills-viral-reach-when-sharing-other-pages-post> (accessed November 29, 2013).

Figure 7 is a graph of the same time period plotting out the number of likes, comments, and shares for each day. There is an obvious correlation between engagement and reach. This is exactly what this project is driving at. What kind of content posted by a church will generate engagement for optimal reach? Using *Insights* helps answer that question. In this case, it was a patriotic photo album.

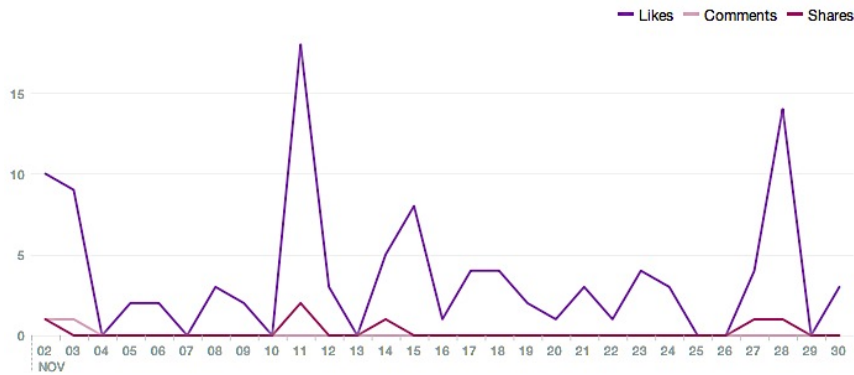


Figure 7

Insights also tracks the demographics of the users who are interacting with the content and analyzes the gender, age, and general location of this audience. Because interaction from the followers is critical to reaching a broader Facebook audience, this information is helpful in determining what type of content the page should generate. If, for example, the largest demographic is females ages 25-34—as is the case for this church page in Figure 8—content that appeals to young women should be regularly worked into the page’s posts. Maybe that means a blog post about the role of children in a worship service. Maybe that means a well-written article about dating or marriage. Maybe that simply means an image with an inspirational Bible passage inscribed. Providing content that is typically enjoyed by the largest demographic of followers is the path of least resistance toward reaching a broader audience.

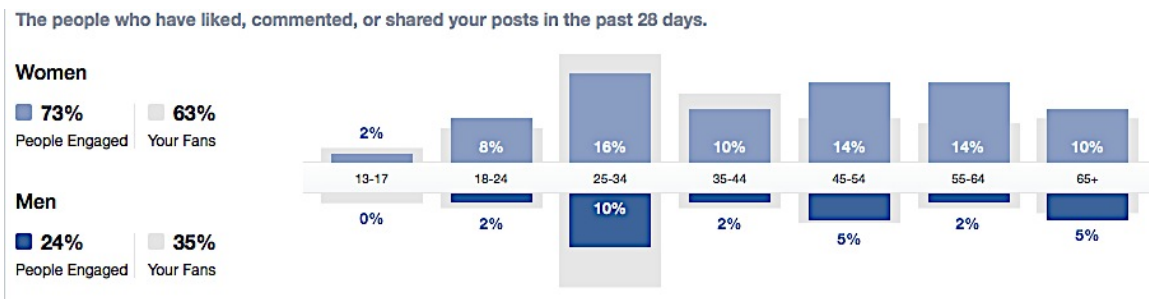


Figure 8

This is not to say that the smaller demographics should be ignored. Figure 8 shows that there are still plenty of male and female followers in different age groups. Changing up the targeted demographic as well as the post type (photo, video, article, text, etc.) ensures that the church is sharing something relevant for all Facebook users.

Step 5: *Make Contact with Prospects*

Say the plan works. There are prospects living nearby the church who have clicked “Like” at the top of the page. They are now receiving the devotions, sermon videos, and VBS pictures in their news feeds when they logon. What happens next?

It might be a good idea to send that person a personal message through Facebook, thanking them for following the page and inviting them to worship. Although this might scare some off, most will appreciate the gesture. But that’s not the only way to create a physical meeting with these digital visitors.

Martin Spriggs, the Chief Technology Officer for WELS, makes these suggestions to move from online engagement to face-to-face contact:

Connect digital posts to physical places. As you try to determine what content to post on Facebook think of content that has its root or fulfillment in a physical gathering. For instance, post a question or insight based on a good discussion that happened in the previous week’s Sunday morning Bible study class. Assign a person on the social network team to attend the class and cull appropriate material to be used during the week.

Allow organic growth. It will be important to promote and encourage people to create relationships on their own. Allowing members to post freely, comment, and form their own affinity groups will provide opportunity for deeper relationships around topics, projects and events. The temptation many churches have is to limit member participation and make their Facebook presence not much more than their web site, which is fairly one dimensional.

Intentionally create activities that start on Facebook and end in person.

Promotion is critical to the success of any church-sponsored event. You certainly want to promote the event on your Facebook page, but creating online activity before the event will allow members to get excited about it and spread the word to their other Facebook friends. If it’s “movie night” create some intriguing questions. If it’s a presentation on Internet Safety, solicit questions/answers on related topics.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Martin Spriggs, “Social Networks and the Church (Facebook Part 2)” *Martin Spriggs*, January 20, 2013, <http://blog.martinspriggs.com/2013/01/20/social-networks-and-the-church-facebook-part-two> (accessed November 29, 2013).

As with any outreach prospect, meeting with prospects gained through social media requires persistence, patience, and prayer. This plan is not a magic formula for making the unchurched flock to the church, but it is a method that requires hard work. The door still needs knocking. The phone still needs ringing. Resistance is still expected. Yet the angels rejoice in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Meeting the Facebook prospects in person is the primary objective of this Facebook strategy. It is only then that the pastor can communicate law and gospel in a one-on-one situation. Whether that meeting happens at worship, in the pastor's office, or at the prospect's house, personally getting that person in touch with the spoken and written Word and with the tangible sacraments is the goal for digital evangelism.

Paid Marketing

Everything presented in this five-step plan is free. The only payment required is one of time, not of money. Yet there should be a word here about paid marketing on Facebook. Facebook's stock entered public trade in 2012 and since then the company has sought profit more aggressively. One of the ways they have done this is by limiting the number of users reached through methods like the five-step plan this paper suggests—forcing companies (and churches) to pay for optimum reach.

There are two options for paid marketing. One is to create an advertisement that will appear in a panel on the side of the user's screen. The other is to "boost" an existing post so that it reaches more users. What makes either of the options worthwhile is the large amount of control Facebook gives to the page admins to decide which people they want to reach. Admins can target a specific audience based on age, gender, geographical location, and even interests. For example, a congregation could target an ad campaign for Vacation Bible School toward women ages 21-35 within 30 miles of the church who have "liked" Jesus, the Bible, or a local preschool. Pricing for paid marketing on Facebook is typically more affordable than other forms of advertising, depending on the selected plans and options.

There is some evidence within our church body that paid marketing is worth it. Of the 17 WELS churches I surveyed, eight used a paid advertisement feature. Of those eight, seven also reported that they have had a visitor at worship who heard about the church

through Facebook. Again, the sample size is quite small, but an 88% “success rate” is impressive. One church in Wisconsin even reported having reached 20,000 people with an Easter invitation. Paid marketing will be something for churches to consider in the near future as Facebook continues to seek profit. If a church does decide to utilize the paid options, the five steps presented here become more significant as traffic to the page increases.

Conclusion

This specific five-step plan has not been tested. It has not been proven to produce any measurable results, it is just an idea based on observation and some research. Yet I am confident that a congregation that puts these ideas into practice will discover the amazing ways in which it can connect people to their Savior through social media.

The plan does require a lot of work, which might be worrisome in a world where technology changes so quickly. Facebook turns 10 years old in 2014, who knows if it will last another 10? Will all that hard work go to waste? Not according to the research that suggests the Millennial generation will make sharing information on social networks in one form or another a lifelong habit.⁶¹ Communication is an ever-changing tide that must be studied continually by people called by God to communicate Christ through every available way. The principles behind this Facebook strategy could be molded and applied to whatever shape social media will take in the future.

Perhaps Jesus’ parable of the Sower and the Seed in Matthew 19 is a good analogy for social media evangelism. Some seed will fall on the path. Some will fall on the rocky places. Some will fall among the thorns. Yet some will fall on good soil and produce a crop. In the far-reaching and fast-paced field of Facebook, there’s no telling where that seed will end up, or whose soul will be saved. Make no mistake; the Holy Spirit can and does save souls through the proclamation and publication of the gospel on Facebook. He did for Amy; and there are many like her in the communities surrounding our congregations waiting for the seed of the gospel to be planted in their hearts as well.

⁶¹ Jana Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Millennials will Make Sharing on Social Networks a Lifelong Habit,” *Pew Research Center*, July 9, 2010, <http://pewinternet.org/2010/07/09/millennials-will-make-online-sharing-in-networks-a-lifelong-habit> (accessed February 10, 2014).

Appendix 1: *Glossary of Terms*

Help with Jargon⁶²

Admin- Admins are people who create and manage activity in groups and Pages.

Cover Photo- A cover photo is the larger photo at the top of your Timeline, right above your profile picture. Like your profile picture, cover images are public, which means anyone visiting your Timeline will be able to see them.

Friends- Friends are people you connect and share with on Facebook.

Mobile- You can update your status, browse your News Feed and view friends' timelines all from your mobile phone.

News Feed- The center column of your home page is a constantly updating list of stories from people and Pages that you follow on Facebook. News feed stories include status updates, photos, videos, links, app activity and likes.

Like- Clicking Like under something you or a friend posts on Facebook is an easy way to let someone know that you enjoy it, without leaving a comment. Just like a comment though, the fact that you liked it is noted beneath the item.

When you click Like on a Facebook Page, in an advertisement, or on content off of Facebook, you are making a connection... You may see updates in your feeds and the feeds of your friends from Pages you like. You may also receive messages.

Notifications- Email, on-site or mobile updates about activity on Facebook.

Page- Allows businesses, brands and celebrities to connect with people on Facebook. Admins can post information and News Feed updates to people who like their pages.

Profile- On Facebook, your profile is your timeline.

Profile Picture- Your profile picture is the main photo of you on your timeline. Your profile picture appears as a thumbnail next to your comments and other activity on Facebook.

Tagging- A tag links a person, Page or place to something you post, like a status update or a photo. For example, you can tag a photo to say who's in the photo or post a status update and say who you're with.

Ticker- Similar to a News Feed. The ticker is on the right side of your home page and lets you see all your friends' activity in real time.

⁶² <https://facebook.com/help/219443701509174>

Timeline- Your collection of the photos, stories, and experiences that tell your story on your profile. Here are some of the things you can do on your Timeline: Add a cover photo. Edit your basic info. Jump to stories from your past. View a log of your Facebook activity. Star stories you want to highlight. Add life events. Update your status. View and add photos. Share your app activity. See highlights from each month.

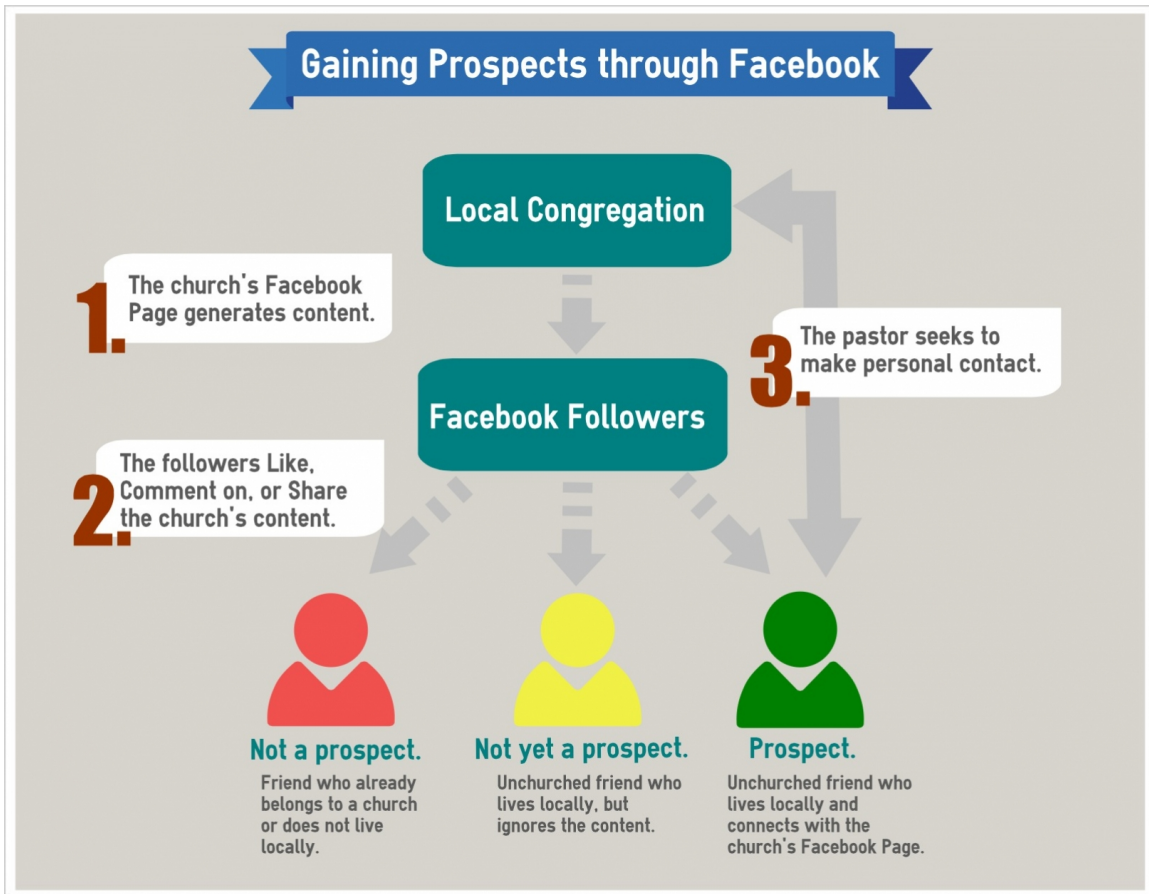
Reach- The number of unique people who saw your post in News Feed or on your Page, including people who saw it from a story shared by a friend when they liked, commented on or shared your post, answered a question or responded to an event

Wall- The space on your timeline where you and friends can post and share.

Appendix 2: The Plan Visualized



This infographic is a visual representation of the five-step plan. Each step is an ongoing process that is maximized by carrying out the other steps. Step 4 will determine how to better do Step 3. Steps 2 and 3 will make members more willing to get involved in Step 1. Step 5 can only happen if Steps 1-4 are done consistently. The steps form a cyclical process that, with the Lord's blessing, will create opportunities to witness to the unchurched.



This infographic offers a different view of the plan. It illustrates the travel of information from the congregation to potential prospects. The church page posts content that lands in the news feed of its Facebook followers. The followers will then engage with the content so that it will land in the news feeds of their Facebook friends. Of these friends, some will be interested, but live too far away to be considered a prospect. Some will live nearby, but ignore the content. Yet some will live nearby and interact with the content. This last group will be considered prospects that the pastor will personally seek to call on.

Appendix 3: Thoughts from Local Congregations

These are the responses to the survey question, “What advantages do you see in using Facebook for evangelism?”

It makes use of trusted connections—friends—that make the unchurched person more likely to inquire further or explore the campaign.

Members can easily share event posts and other posts with friends. It is another avenue for word of mouth connections.

It’s another avenue for members or prospective members to be connected to events or other information.

Our church posts a notice about an event, and all the members have to do is repost or share, and they have instantly invited everyone they know on Facebook to take part in an event or worship service at our church.

Our mission with Facebook is to use it as an extension of our mission to spread the gospel. We always make it about the event/information combined with the message of the Word. It reaches a lot of our congregation and they can use it to be witnesses themselves very easily.

Our use of Facebook has always been more generally geared for our members. However, Facebook is an easy way for members to promote the church to others typically in the way of sharing sermons and devotions. This is easier than telling someone to visit a website.

I think it gets people comfortable identifying themselves as Christian in a functionally public forum. I’m not sure it results in too many unchurched seeing something and responding to it. But it’s almost a mini practice for people as they share/link information. The next step is talking about it.

Ask any pastor. The most effective way to get people to your church is through friendship evangelism—members inviting their friends. When you ask most people how they joined the church, the answer is usually, “Well, my friend invited me.” Facebook is all about friends! It allows us to see the friends of our members.

It’s just a conscious practical decision. How much sense would it make to put your church sign in the back of your building? None—because no one would see it. Facebook is where the people “see” things today. If you want them to see your church (or the gospel in general), that’s where you need to put it. It’s the “marketplace” right now.

We use Facebook for both inreach and outreach. The advantages are that a lot of people see our page and can post comments or share content. It is amazing how we have 248

Likes but a good percentage of those are not our members. We have people from all over the world who read our church's posts.

Members and friends will share some of our posts on their personal pages to get the gospel out. Sometimes it's an invite to a fellowship activity, which can lead to opportunities for outreach. I think it's a cheap effective way to get the gospel out to a lot of people at once.

We have reached a much wider audience via Facebook. When we put together an ad campaign on Facebook leading up to Easter in 2013 we reached over 20,000 people several weeks in a row. We've had membership and baptism requests as well. People are sharing our posts to their Facebook pages increasing our reach even further.

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